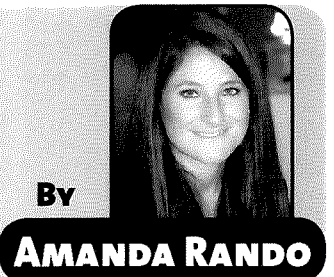


WE'LL CATCH THE CHEATS

HRNSW now testing three-year-old swabs



By
AMANDA RANDO

THESE days there seems to be a new “wonder” drug available every week . . . be it from peptides and hormones to capsaicin and ITPP.

And as harness racing evolves unfortunately so do the banned substances.

Yet harness racing isn't the only sport facing these issues, as it has been well documented recently that other sports are going through the same demanding procedure to protect their integrity.

The need to have an edge over opposition seems to have a greater urgency than ever before, however, it seems as though the regulatory system is finally starting to catch up with it.

New South Wales is leading the way when it comes to drug testing in harness racing.

With a record number of swabs taken, tested and found in recent years, the Authority – Harness Racing New South Wales – has been taking a strong stance against those willing to break the rules.

The man responsible to protect the integrity of harness racing in the state is New Zealand-born Reid Sanders.

Since he was appointed to the role of Regulatory Manager at HRNSW in August, 2011 Sanders has had to deal with 41 positive swabs.

And this is due to a number of reasons, according to Sanders.

“The world is evolving and we're trying to evolve with it,” Sanders said.

“Our swabbing procedures here in New South Wales are second to none

in harness racing across Australia and in some areas of the thoroughbred industry as well.

“Purely on numbers we are leading the way in swab-testing procedures and we aim to be proactive rather than reactive.

“Thankfully the Board (HRNSW) support this and have invested significantly in making this happen otherwise, without financial assistance, we wouldn't be where we are.”

A new approach HRNSW has taken recently is the testing of frozen swab samples.

With a newly-purchased -80°C freezer, swabs taken from almost three years ago are being tested.

“It's a strategy we need to employ as a greater deterrent for those contemplating giving their horse a prohibited substance,” Sanders said.

“Currently there are 180 frozen samples that go back to 2011 and we are continuing to freeze samples and have recently begun testing them.

“At the moment with the help of laboratories from all over Australia as well as outside of the country, we can analyse swab samples for many substances including ITPP, which was the buzz word for a while, as well as specific tests on peptides, which seems to be the new craze in the sports world plus anything that can obviously affect a horse in various ways.

“You will eventually be caught and that's the message we want to send out.”

Yet, given warnings like this, positive swabs are still about.

With racing in the state seemingly cleaner than it has ever been, it is hard to fathom that there are participants still willing to try and beat the system.

“Some people just want to have that competitive edge and that will always be the case, especially when there are large sums of money involved,” Sanders said.

“It's not only equine sports that face problems like this and we just have to remain ahead of it by implementing strategies to combat it all.”

That includes increasing the amount of swab samples taken.

Currently HRNSW aims to swab at least 20 per cent of the racing population a month.

“Each month we sit down and strategize how many horses we aim to swab,” Sanders said.

“We have a standard to swab 20 per cent of horses that are racing and some months we swab between 25 and 28 per cent.

“Research papers show that if you swab this amount of horses you will have a 98.5 per cent of catching drugged horses.”

Assisting this goal is the new i-STAT machine that is used on course at race meetings.

It is a hand-held blood analyser that gives reliable lab-like results within minutes.

“The new i-STAT machine gives real-time testing,” Sanders said.

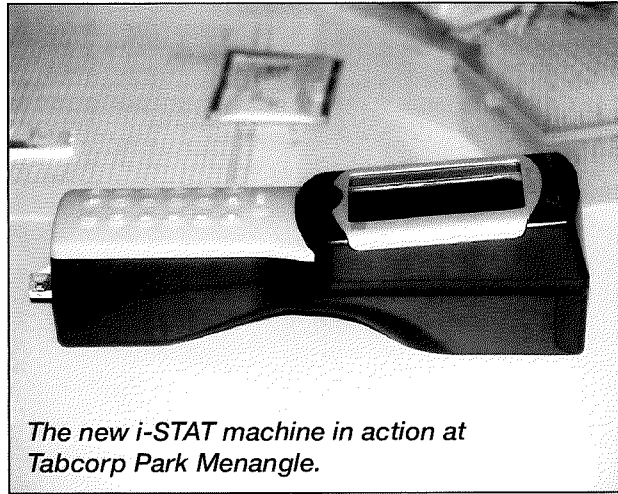
“We've been using it for the more than six months and it has been a huge success.



Stepping up the drug-testing procedures . . . chief steward and regulatory manager Reid Sanders.



Dr. Martin Wainscott tests a swab, with steward Chris Paul looking on.



The new i-STAT machine in action at Tabcorp Park Menangle.



HRNSW vet Dr. Martin Wainscott takes a swab at Tabcorp Park Menangle . . . under the watchful eye of the Trots TV cameras.

“It has been well received and very popular and a lot of other states are using it as well because it's a cost effective way of drug testing.

“So far we haven't picked up any irregularities.

“We haven't changed our drug testing procedures that much but we are working a lot more closely with laboratories.

“We use a wide range of laboratories in Australia and offshore that have new equipment so we can be at the forefront of our anti-doping capabilities.”

These drug-testing advancements are just some of the changes made to the sport since Sanders began his role on August 1, 2011.

But the most significant integrity issue that he has been a part of happened just seven days into the job.

On August 8, 2011, the ‘Green Light Scandal’ was made public when HRNSW stewards Paul O'Toole and Matthew Bentley tendered their resignations in relation to an investigation of misconduct.

And it has escalated since.

Just a handful of months after this, in the week of the Miracle Mile in November, O'Toole as well as trainers Dean Atkinson and Michael Russo and drivers Cameron Fitzpatrick and Greg Bennett were arrested and charged with various counts of corruption.

Atkinson pleaded guilty to three charges at the first available opportunity and was sentenced to 100 hours of community service for each charge – to be served concurrently – and was disqualified for 10 years by HRNSW.

Fitzpatrick pleaded guilty to three charges also and was sentenced to 150

hours of community service for each charge as well as being disqualified by HRNSW for 15 years.

Meanwhile Russo pleaded guilty to 11 counts of corruption and on February 28, 2013, was sentenced to 30-months jail with a non-parole period of 15 months.

O'Toole, who is facing 39 charges, and Bennett who has pleaded not guilty to seven corruption charges, are still having their respective cases heard.

And while all of this has happened, HRNSW has stood down a dozen people – a mixture of trainers, drivers and owners in relation to this corruption scandal.

This includes former driver Ben Sarina, who was warned off permanently by HRNSW's Special Stewards Panel in February.

And the investigation is continuing, according to Sanders.

“I can't say when all of this is going to end,” he said.

“These things take time but in the long run it is all worth it.

“We are starting to see light at the end of the tunnel and the industry is moving forward.

“However, while there are still criminal matters at foot, it limits us (HRNSW) from acting in other matters.

“We are continuing the investigation and ticking over new evidence.

“It has been a can of worms that has continued to grow.

“But we are satisfied we know what is in the can.

“It's just a matter of how you open it up.”